

Passenger Rail Service Complaints 2020-21 Quarter 4

24 June 2021

Background:

This quarterly statistical release contains information on complaints made by passengers regarding rail services in Great Britain.

These statistics cover: **complaints volumes**, **complaints categories**, **complaint response time** within 20 working days and **appeals** made to passenger watchdogs.

Sources: Train Operating Companies, Transport Focus, London TravelWatch, and RDG.

Latest quarter: 2020-21 Q4 (January 2021 to March 2021).

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Next publication:

21 October 2021

During 2020-21, passenger rail service complaints have been affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The volume of train services and passengers on the network decreased considerably compared with 2019-20, resulting in high levels of punctuality and reliability and subsequently a low volume of complaints.

Overall, there were **133,003 complaints closed** by train operators in 2020-21. This represents a decrease of 75.1% compared to 2019-20. Ticketing and refunds policy was the most complained about category, accounting for 17.4% of all complaints closed.

Top five complaint categories, Great Britain, 2020-21 (Table 4130)

Type of complaint	% of all complaints	Percentage point change compared with 2019-20
 Ticketing and refunds policy	17.4%	10.9
 Punctuality/reliability	14.1%	-10.2
 Other ticket buying facilities - online ticket sales	8.0%	1.8
 The attitudes and helpfulness of the staff at station	5.0%	1.4
 Ticket buying facilities	4.5%	1.1

Overall, **94.2% of complaints were closed within 20 working days** in 2020-21. A total of 19 out of the 23 train operators met the industry requirement to close 95% of their complaints within 20 working days.

Overall, 77.6% of complaints were made by email or by using a webform (down 1.1pp compared with 2019-20).

Passenger watchdogs closed **843 appeals** in 2020-21, a 20.6% decrease compared with 2019-20. The most appealed about compliant category was ticketing and refunds policy, accounting for 36.3% of all appeals closed in 2020-21.

All data tables, a quality and methodology report and an interactive dashboard associated with this release are published on the [passenger rail service complaints page](#) of the data portal. Key definitions are in annex 1 of this release.

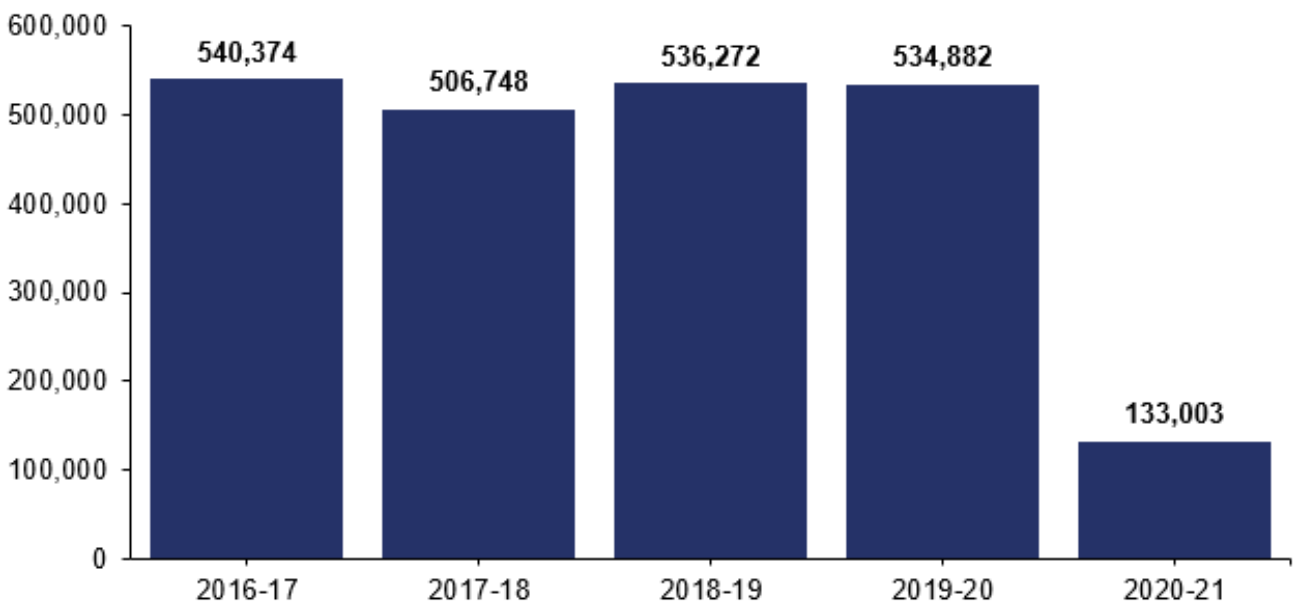
1. Complaint volumes closed

2020-21 Annual

[Passenger rail usage](#) in 2020-21 was affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Rail passenger journeys in Great Britain for 2020-21 were down 77.7% compared with the journeys recorded in 2019-20. This has therefore affected the complaints rate (complaints per 100,000 journeys) figures which are usually presented within this release (further information can be found in the [quality and methodology report](#)). An alternative measure showing complaint volumes closed has been provided below with a time series back to 2016-17 Quarter 1. Comparisons between train operator complaint volumes should be treated with caution because the number of train journeys by each operator varies. Complaint rate is normally used as it enables fair comparisons between train operators and comparisons over time to be made. Please see the [2019-20 Q4 Passenger Rail Service Complaints statistical release](#) for the long-term trend of the complaints rate from 1998-99 to 2019-20.

Overall, there were 133,003 complaints closed by train operators in 2020-21. This represents a decrease of 75.1% from 2019-20 when there were 534,882 complaints closed.

Figure 1.1 Complaint volumes closed, Great Britain, 2016-17 to 2020-21 (Table 4100)

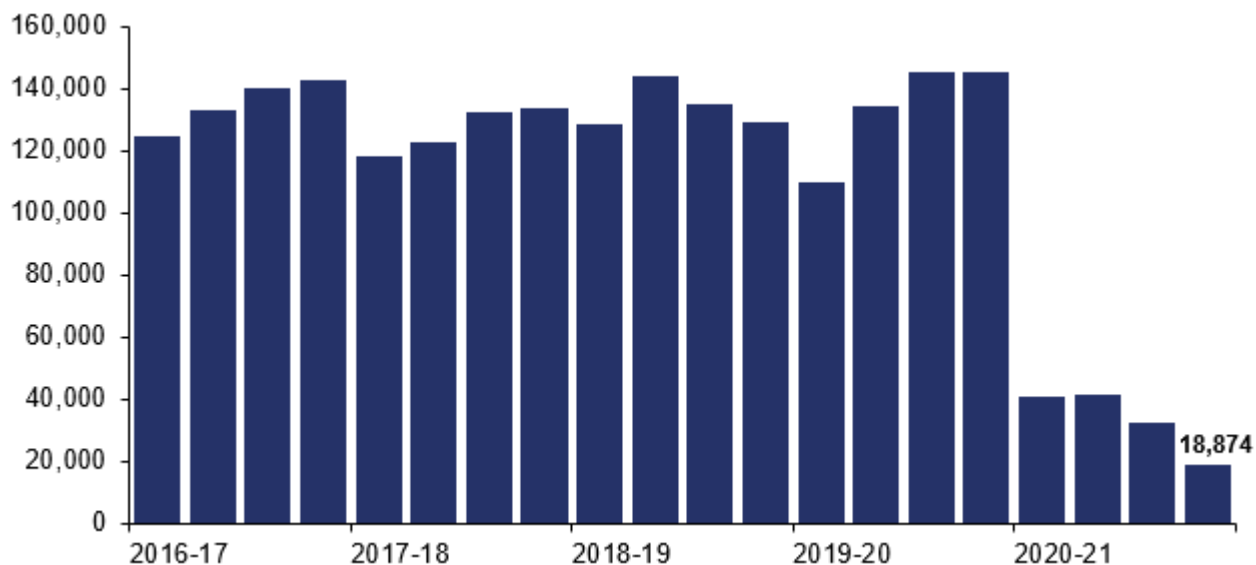


2020-21 Quarter 4

Overall, there were 18,874 complaints closed by train operators in 2020-21 Q4. This represents a decrease of 87.0% from 2019-20 Q4 when there were 145,442 complaints and the lowest quarterly total since the time series began in 2016-17 Q1.

During 2020-21 Q4, there has been a 41.5% decrease in complaints closed compared with 2020-21 Q3. This coincides with the 42.8% decline in [rail passenger journeys](#) from 139 million in 2020-21 Q3 to 80 million in 2020-21 Q4.

Figure 1.2 Complaint volumes closed, Great Britain, 2016-17 Q1 to 2020-21 Q4 (Table 4100)



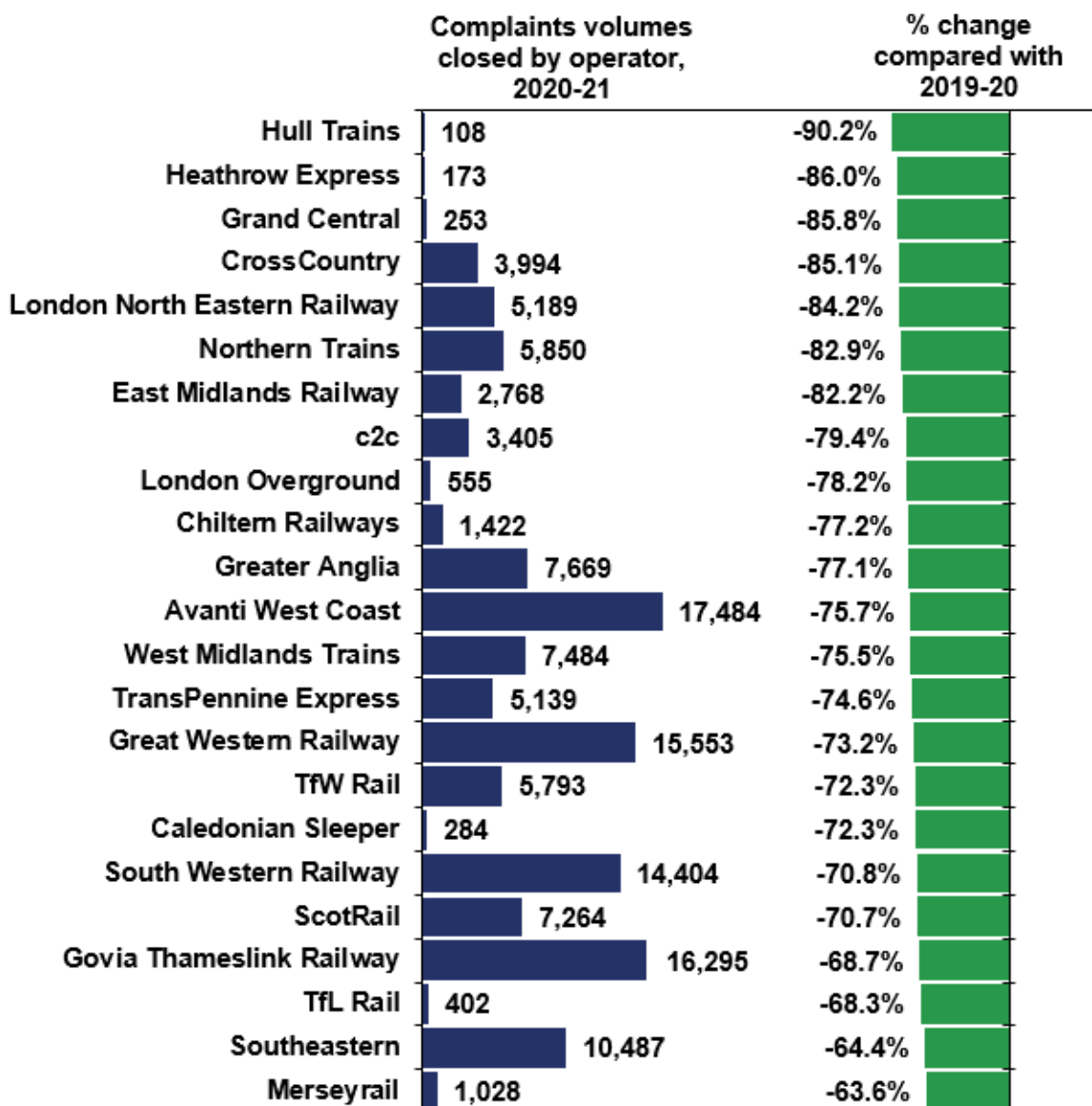
2. Complaint volumes closed by train operator

2020-21 Annual

During 2020-21, all train operators experienced declines in complaint volumes closed compared with the previous year.

Hull Trains had the largest decrease in complaints closed, with a 90.2% reduction compared with 2019-20. However, it is worth noting that both Hull Trains and Grand Central ran very few services in Q1 and Q4 of 2020-21. Merseyrail had the smallest decrease in complaints closed, with a 63.6% reduction compared to 2019-20.

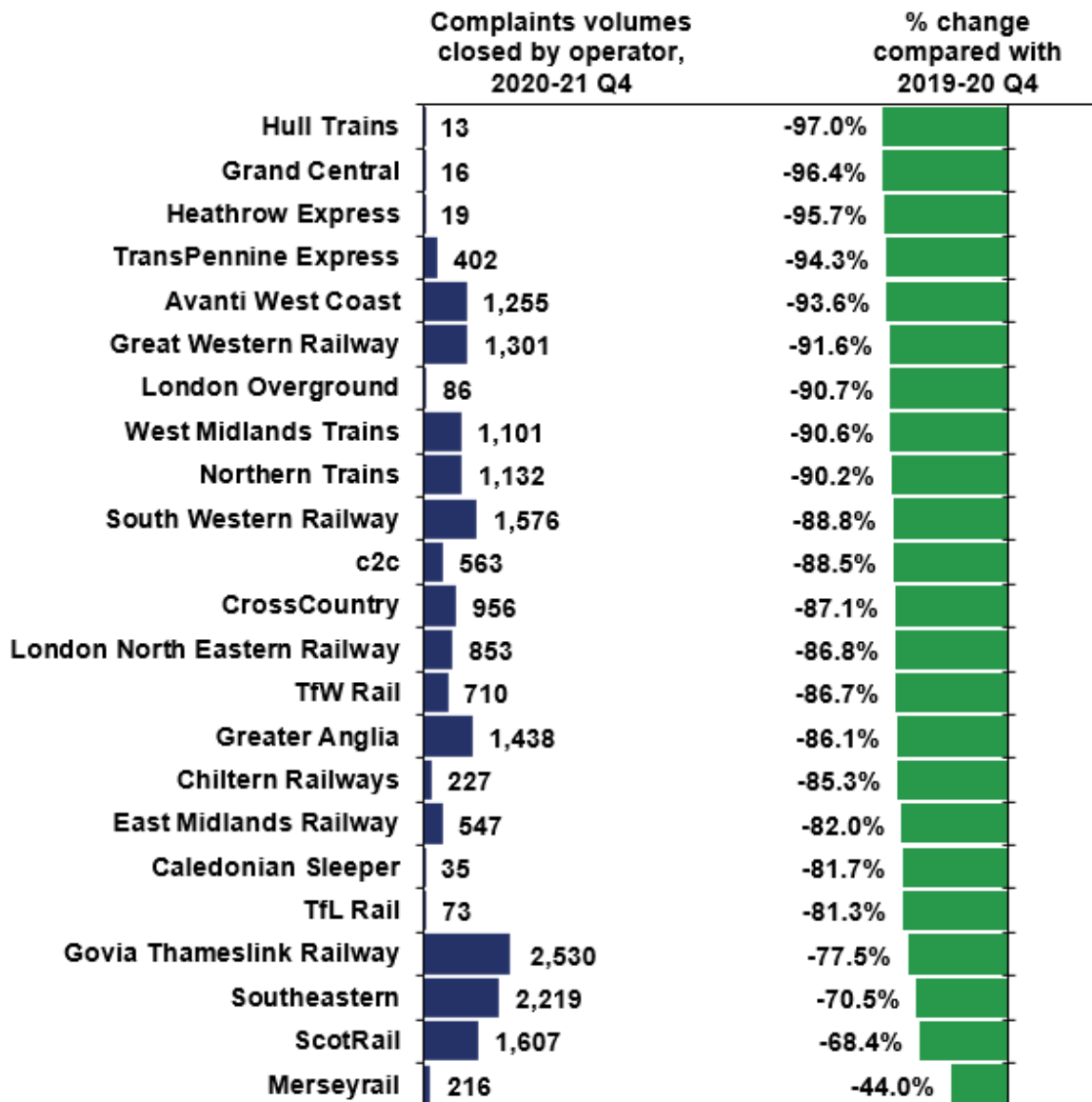
Figure 2.1 Complaints volumes closed by train operator, Great Britain, 2020-21 (Table 4100)



2020-21 Quarter 4

During 2020-21 Q4, Hull Trains (down 97.0%) had the largest decrease in complaints closed compared with 2019-20 Q4. However, again, it is worth noting that both Hull Trains and Grand Central ran very few services in Q4 of 2020-21. Merseyrail (down 44.0%) had the smallest decrease in complaints closed compared with 2019-20 Q4.

Figure 2.2 Complaints volumes closed by train operator, Great Britain, 2020-21 Q4 (Table 4100)



3. Complaints by category

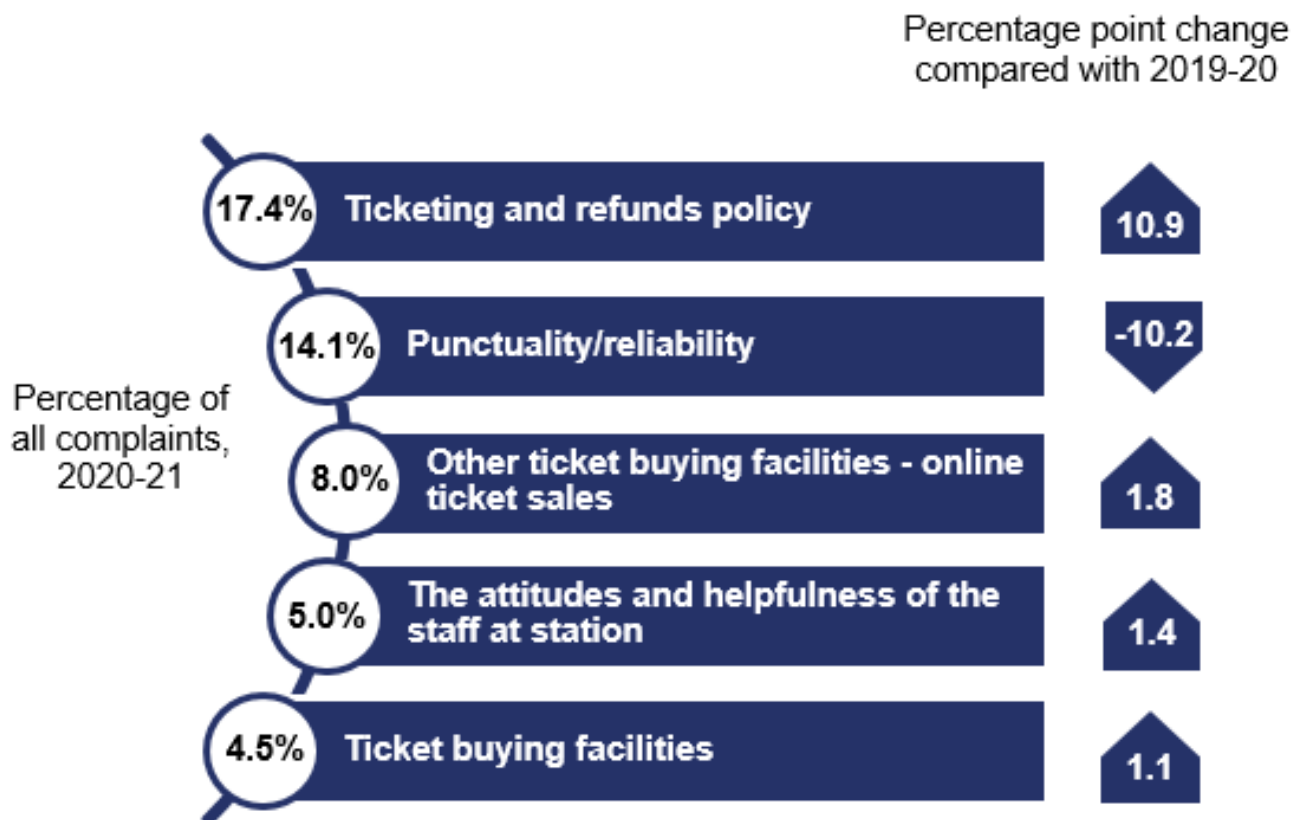
2020-21 Annual

During 2020-21, ticketing and refunds policy was the most common cause to complain to train operators, accounting for 17.4% of all complaints closed (up 10.9 percentage points (pp) compared with 2019-20). This was likely due to passengers applying for ticket refunds as a result of reduced travel due to the pandemic.

Complaints about punctuality and reliability was the second most common cause of complaint, with 14.1% of all complaints made (down 10.2pp compared with 2019-20). This is the first year that punctuality and reliability has not been the most complained about category (since the national time series began in 2015-16).

The third most common cause of complaint during 2020-21 was regarding online ticket buying facilities, accounting for 8.0% of all complaints made (up 1.8pp compared with 2019-20).







Figure 3.1 Top five complaint categories by percentage, Great Britain, 2020-21 (Table 4130)



Largest changes in complaint categories







The largest increase in 2020-21 compared with 2019-20 was regarding ticketing and refunds policy (up 10.9pp).

Figure 3.2 Top three increases in complaints category in 2020-21 compared with 2019-20, Great Britain (Table 4130)

	2020-21 percentage of all complaints	pp change from 2019-20
 Ticketing and refunds policy	17.4%	 10.9
 Your personal security on board	4.1%	 2.7
 Other ticket buying facilities - online ticket sales	8.0%	 1.8

The largest decrease in 2020-21 compared with 2019-20 was regarding punctuality and reliability (down 10.2pp).

Figure 3.3 Top three decreases in complaints category in 2020-21 compared with 2019-20, Great Britain (Table 4130)

	2020-21 percentage of all complaints	pp change from 2019-20
 Punctuality/reliability	14.1%	 -10.2
 Facilities on board	3.8%	 -6.4
 Sufficient room for all passengers to sit/stand	2.2%	 -5.5

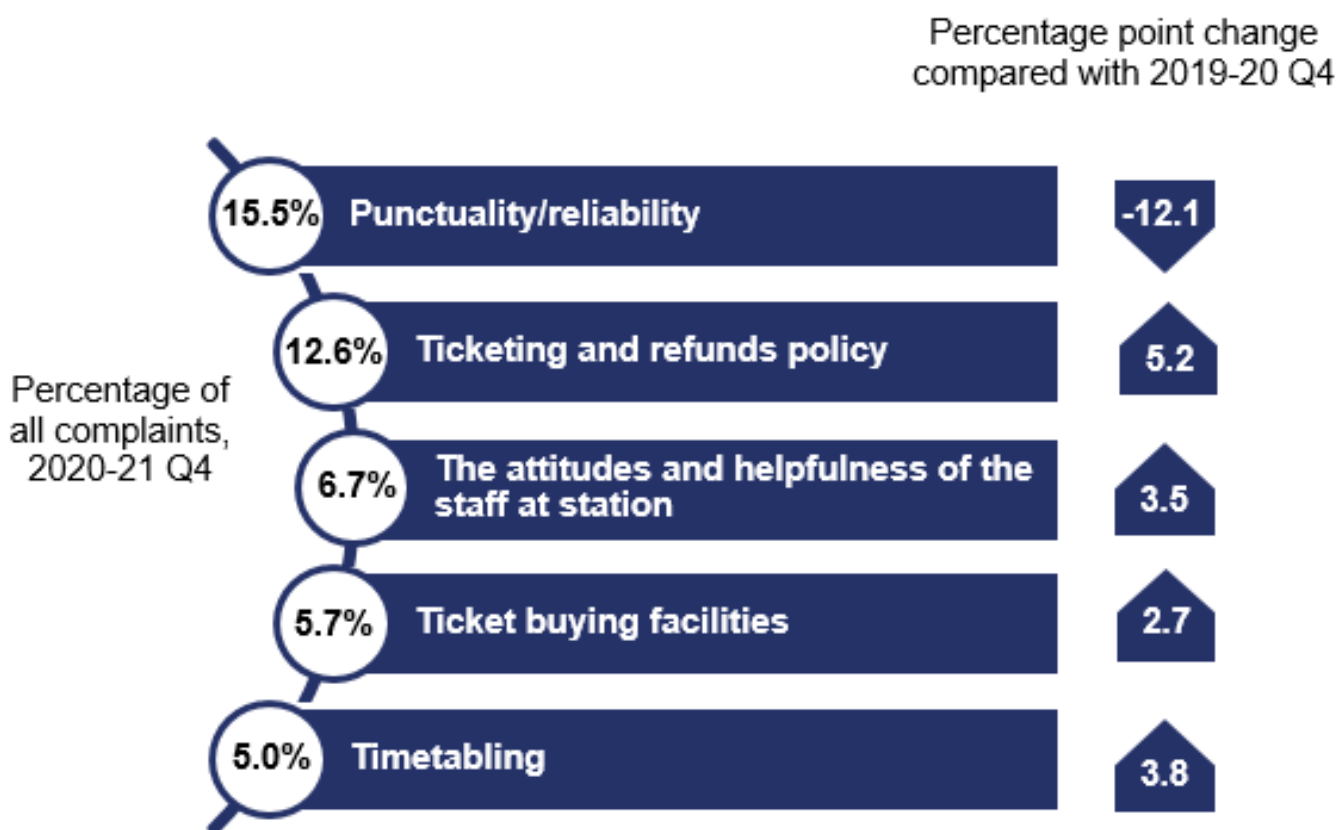
2020-21 Quarter 4

Although, punctuality and reliability is no longer the most complained about category for 2020-21 (as in previous years), it has returned to being the most complained about category for Q4 for the first time this year. During 2020-21 Q4, complaints regarding punctuality and reliability accounted for 15.5% of all complaints closed. Despite being the most complained about category, punctuality and reliability complaints also had the largest percentage point decrease in 2020-21 Q4 compared with 2019-20 Q4 (down 12.1pp).

Complaints about ticketing and refunds policy was the second most common cause of complaint, with 12.6% of all complaints closed. This is the first quarter of 2020-21 that ticketing and refunds policy has not been the most complained about category, however, these complaints also had the highest percentage point increase when compared with 2019-20 Q4 (up 5.2pp).

The third most common cause of complaint during 2020-21 Q4 was regarding the attitudes and helpfulness of staff at the station, accounting for 6.7% of all complaints made (up 3.5pp compared with 2019-20 Q4).

Figure 3.4 Top five complaint categories by percentage, Great Britain, 2020-21 Q4 (Table 4130)



4. Complaints answered within 20 working days

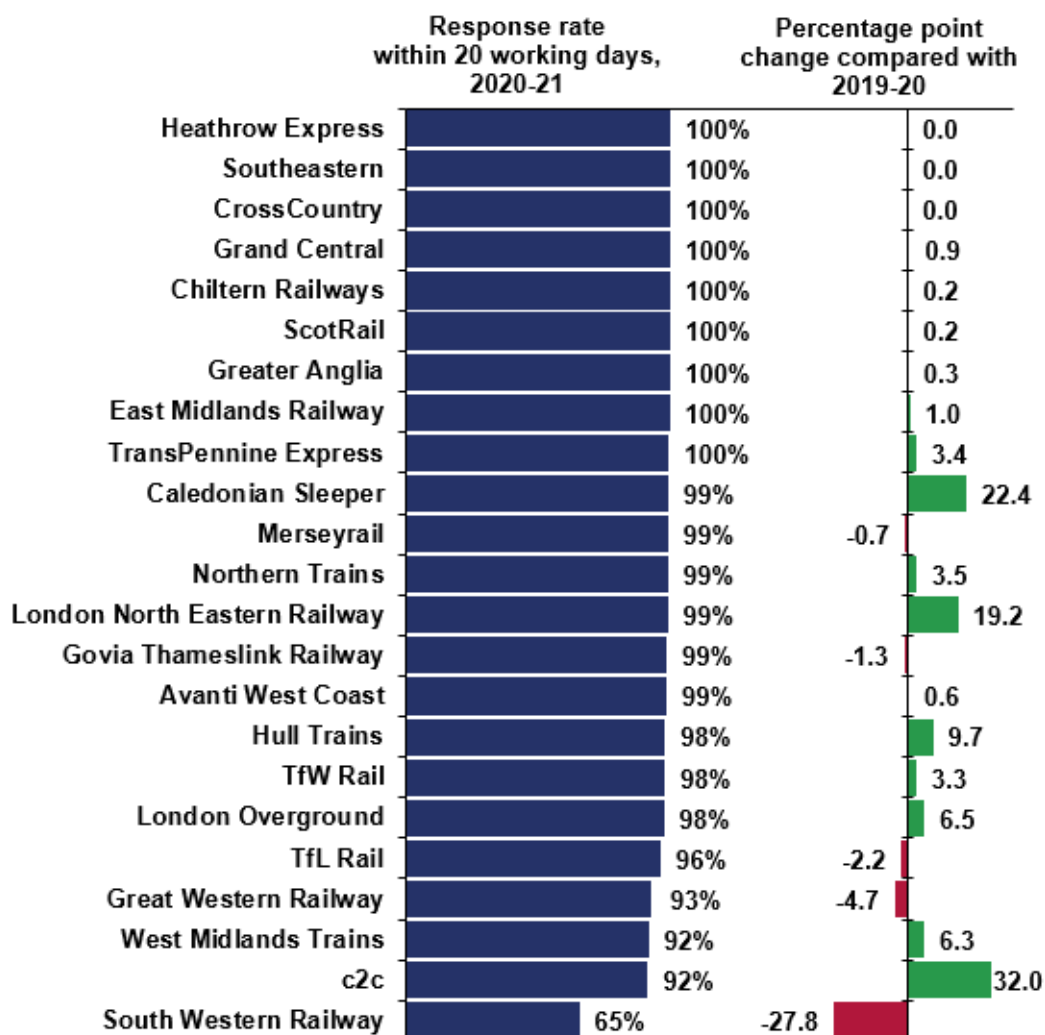
2020-21 Annual

Overall, 94.2% of complaints closed were answered within 20 working days in 2020-21. This represents an increase of 0.5pp compared with 2019-20. This is the third highest annual response rate within 20 working days since the time series break in 2016-17.

In 2020-21, 19 out of 23 train operators met the industry requirement to answer 95% of their complaints within 20 working days. Last year, 16 operators met this requirement.

c2c had the biggest increase in response rate (up 32.0pp) compared with last year. South Western Railway had the largest decrease (down 27.8pp), which was due to them receiving a large volume of refund requests in the early part of the year which impacted upon its ability to meet the requirement to make a full response to 95% of all complaints within 20 working days.

Figure 4.1 Percentage of complaints responded to within 20 working days by train operator, Great Britain, 2020-21 (Table 4153)



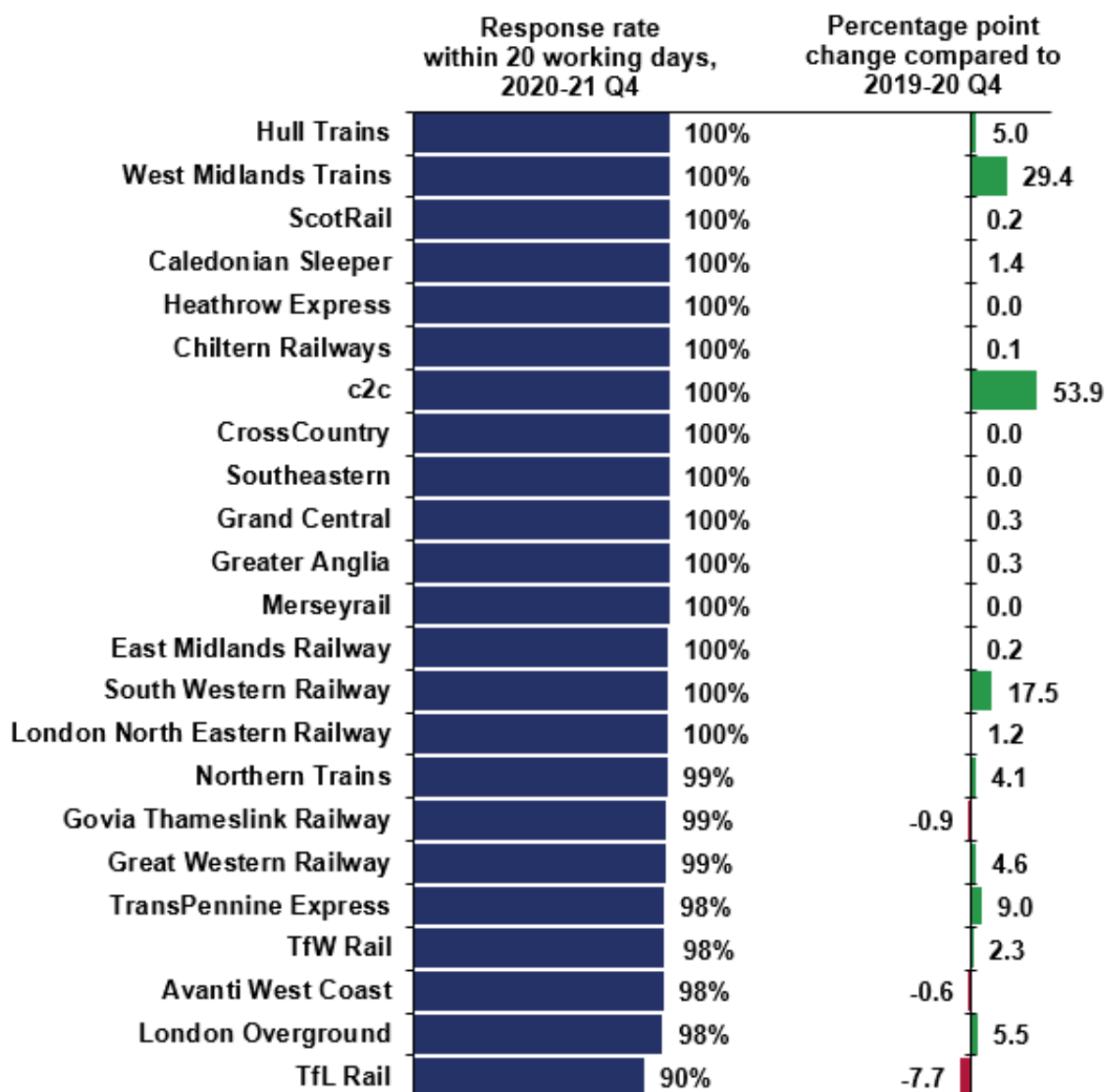
2020-21 Quarter 4

Overall, 99.4% of complaints closed were answered within 20 working days in 2020-21 Q4. This represents an increase of 7.4pp compared with 2019-20 Q4.

In 2020-21 Q4, 22 out of the 23 operators met the industry requirement to answer 95% of their complaints within 20 working days. In Q4 last year, 17 operators met this requirement.

c2c had the biggest increase in response rate (up 53.9pp) followed by West Midlands Trains (up 29.4pp) compared with 2019-20 Q4. TfL Rail had the largest decrease in response rate (down 7.7pp) compared with Q4 last year.

Figure 4.2 Percentage of complaints responded to within 20 working days by train operator, Great Britain, 2020-21 Q4 (Table 4153)

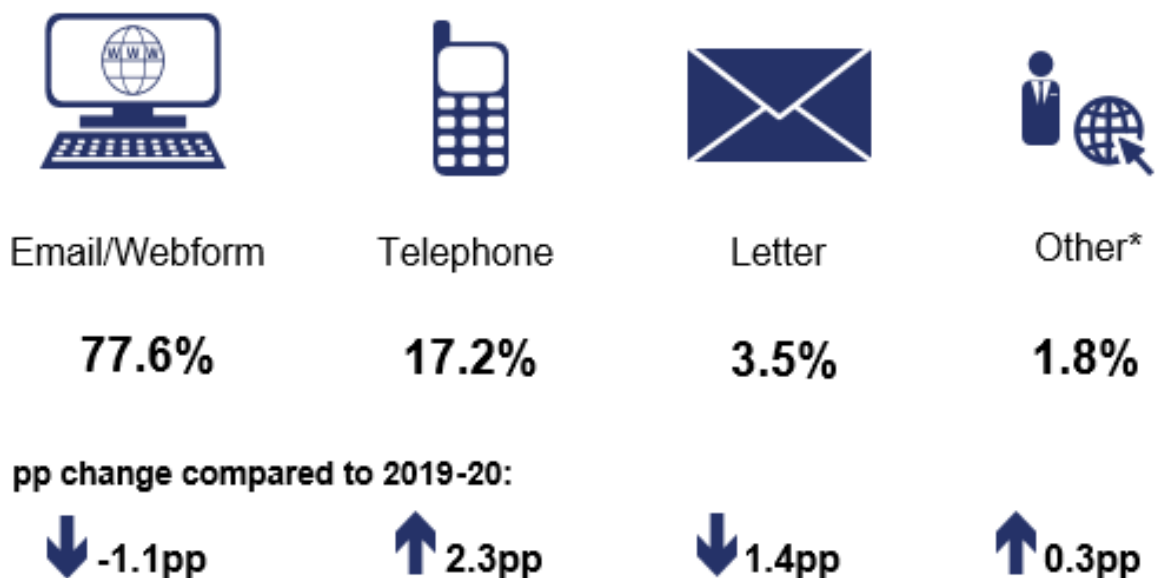


5. Complaint contact methods

2020-21 Annual

Overall, 77.6% of complaints were made by email or by using a webform in 2020-21. This year, the trend of increasing use of email/webform methods to complain to operators has been broken, with a decrease of 1.1pp compared with 2019-20. Between 2016-17 and 2020-21, correspondence using e-mail/webform had increased from 68.4% of complaints to 77.6%, a 9.1pp increase in four years. During the same four-year time period, correspondence using letters had fallen from 13.3% in 2016-17 to 3.5% in 2020-21, a 9.9pp decrease.

Figure 5.1 Percentage of complaints by contact method, Great Britain, 2020-21 (Table 4143)



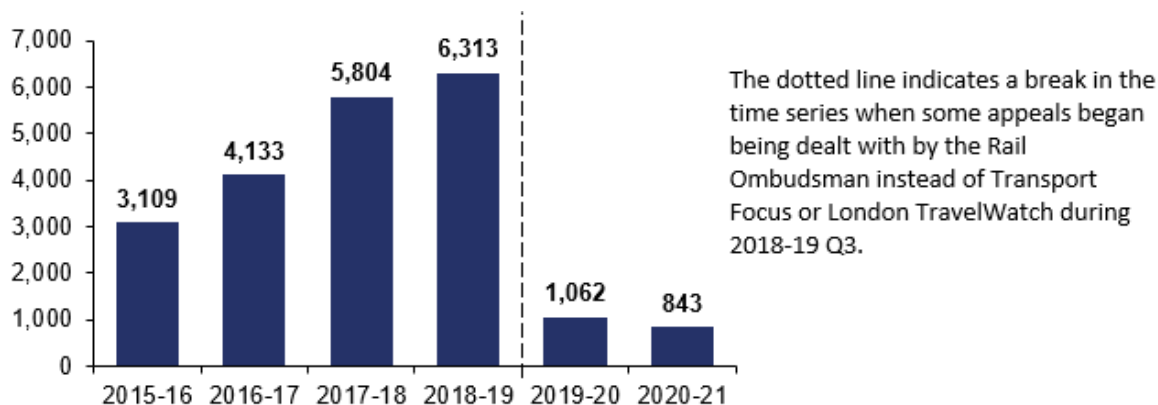
*Other includes 'meet the manager' sessions and online forums

6. Appeals

2020-21 Annual

Passenger watchdogs (Transport Focus and London TravelWatch) closed 843 appeals during 2020-21, this represents a decrease of 20.6% compared with 2019-20.

Figure 6.1 Appeals closed by passenger watchdogs, Great Britain, 2015-16 to 2020-21 (Table 4163)

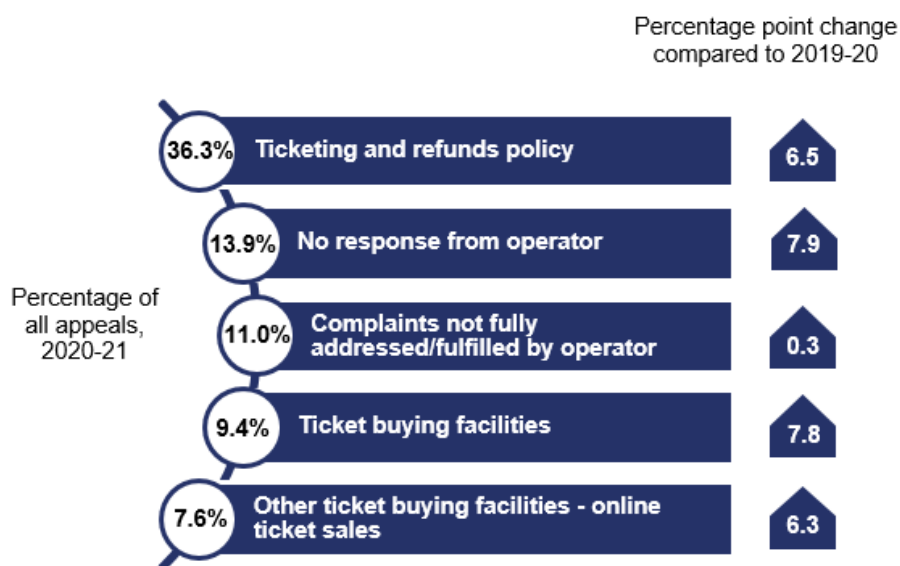


Appeals by category

Appeals about ticketing and refunds policy were the most appealed about complaint category, accounting for 36.3% of all appeals closed in 2020-21 (up 6.5pp compared with 2019-20). Appeals about ticketing and refunds policy are out of scope for the Rail Ombudsman so are dealt with by Transport Focus or London TravelWatch.

Appeals about complainants not receiving a response from the operator were the second most appealed about complaint category with 13.9%. This was an increase of 7.9pp from last year.

Figure 6.2 Top five appeal categories, Great Britain, 2020-21 (Table 4160)



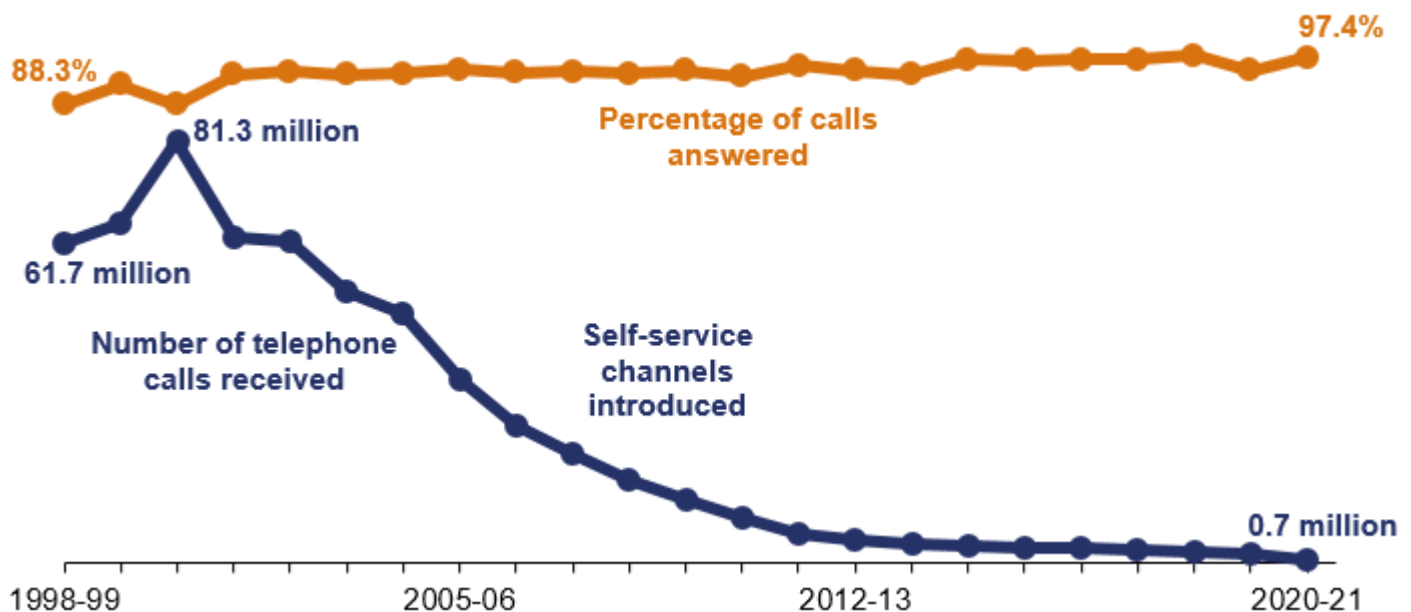
7. National Rail Enquiries telephone service

2020-21 Annual

There were 0.7 million calls made to the National Rail Enquiries (NRE) telephone service during 2020-21, a decrease of 61.5% compared to last year. Of those calls made in 2020-21, 97.4% were answered and 2.6% were abandoned. This is the second highest percentage of calls answered since the time-series began in 1989-99 (the highest being 97.8% in 2018-19).

Since 2000-01, there has been a long-term decline in the number of calls to the NRE telephone service. This decline has been due to the increased availability of other information sources such as on webpages or by mobile app.

Figure 7.1 Number of calls made to the National Rail Enquiries telephone service and percentage of calls answered, Great Britain, 1998-99 to 2020-21 (Table 4180)



8. Annexes

Annex 1 – Definitions

- **Complaints:** In the rail industry a complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction by a customer or potential customer about service delivery or about company or industry policy.
- **Complaint volumes:** The volume of complaint correspondences closed. Each communication with the customer is counted as a single complaint, regardless of how many topics are covered in the communication. Complaint volumes are based on complaints which have had a first full substantive response only.
- **First full substantive response:** The rail company's first substantive response which in its view, reasonably provides a full response to the consumer's complaint. This does not include an acknowledgement or holding response.
- **Complaints rate:** The volume of complaint correspondences closed per 100,000 passenger journeys. Each communication with the customer is counted as a single complaint, regardless of how many topics are covered in the communication.
- **Complaints by category:** The type of complaint received, where each complaint category within the correspondence should be recorded. For example, a letter covering two complaints is counted as two complaints categories. However, this would only be recorded as one complaint correspondence within the complaints volumes and complaints rate.

Appeals: When a customer is unhappy with a train operators' response, they can appeal against their operators' decisions to a passenger watchdog (Transport Focus or London TravelWatch). For information on the [Rail Ombudsman](#), please see the [quality and methodology report](#).

Annex 2 – Quality and Methodology

Data sources

The complaints data contained within the passenger rail service complaints statistical release and data tables are sourced from administrative data submitted by train operators. Appeals data is sourced from passenger watchdogs - Transport Focus and London TravelWatch. National Rail Enquiries data is sourced from the Rail Delivery Group (RDG), this is only included in the Q4 release.

Train operators record information on complaints they receive within their own internal complaints management systems. ORR collects this aggregated data every rail period (i.e. every 4 weeks). In order to ensure consistency between train operators we issue technical guidance and a standard data collection template which can both be found on the [core complaints data page](#).

Social media comments

Social media comments are excluded from these statistics. However, there may be circumstances in which the feedback on social media lends itself to further investigation. The train operator will then assist the complainant in making a formal complaint which will then be dealt with in accordance with the licence holder's Complaints Handling Procedures (CHP). For example, this may involve signposting the complainant to a webform or providing an email address at which they can log a formal complaint. This complaint will then be in scope to be included within these statistics.

Complaints by category

There are 71 detailed categories, mainly based on National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) satisfaction categories, which make up 14 high-level complaint categories. A full list of all complaint categories and the percentages attributed to each category is available on the [Data Portal](#) in Table 4130. This data is also available by individual train operator in Table 4133.

Response times to complaints

For each rail period train operators provide ORR with the percentage of complaint correspondences they have closed within 20 working days. The CHP licence requirement is for train operators to close 95% of complaints within 20 working days. From 2015-16 Q1, we have also collected data on the percentage of complaints responded to within 10 working days, as well as the percentage responded to within the operators' internal target. The response times reported are based on the first full substantive response only.

Complaints per 100,000 journeys

Due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic's effect on [passenger rail usage](#), rail journeys have not been a suitable normaliser for complaint volumes. As such, complaints per 100,000 journeys are not currently a reliable measure and therefore have not been

presented in the 2020-21 statistics. For more details, please see the [quality and methodology report](#).

Appeals

This data provides the number of complaint appeals closed by Transport Focus or London TravelWatch for each train operator and some other rail bodies.

The independent passenger watchdogs may open an appeal on behalf of a rail passenger whose initial complaint to the train operator has not been resolved to their satisfaction. This data does not include appeals made to the Rail Ombudsman.

The type of appeals dealt with by Transport Focus and London TravelWatch have changed since the Rail Ombudsman was introduced. For example, appeals regarding ticketing and refunds policies are 'out of scope' for the Rail Ombudsman so are dealt with by Transport Focus or London TravelWatch, but appeals about the complainant being unhappy at type/level of compensation are 'in scope' for the Rail Ombudsman. Therefore, comparisons on appeal categories with previous years should be treated with caution.

A full list of all appeal categories and the percentage attributed to each is available on the [Data Portal](#) in Table 4160.

Revisions

There have been no revisions to historic data. Further details on historic revisions can be found in the [Revisions log](#).

Further information on data sources, quality, and the methodology used to calculate the data within this release can be found in the [quality and methodology report](#).

How these statistics can and cannot be used



- Comparing complaint volumes over time
- Comparing complaint rates by train operators and over time
- Comparing the proportion of complaints responded to within 20 and 10 working days by train operator and over time
- Comparing complaint contact methods by train operators and over time
- Comparing what rail passengers complain about over time



- Comparing complaint volumes by train operators
- Comparing appeal volumes by train operators
- Using complaints rate and praise rate for 2020-21 (due to the pandemic's effect on [rail usage](#))

Proposed changes for 2021-22 statistics

We are proposing to reduce publication of the following tables from quarterly to annually:

- Appeals closed by Transport Focus and London TravelWatch by operator – Table 4163
- Appeals categories closed by Transport Focus and London TravelWatch – Table 4160

We are also proposing to no longer produce the following table:

- Praise per 100,000 journeys by operator – Table 4123

The reason for this is that we have identified low level of demand for these tables from our web analytics. We welcome any feedback on the above proposals to be sent to rail.stats@orr.gov.uk by 31 July 2021

Annex 3 – List of data tables associated with this release and other related statistics

Data tables

All data tables can be accessed on the [data portal](#) free of charge in OpenDocument Spreadsheet (.ods) format. We can also provide data in csv format on request.

All tables associated with this release can be found under the Data tables heading at the bottom of the [passenger rail service complaints page](#).

Complaint volumes

- Complaints closed by operator – Table 4100

Complaints per 100,000 journeys

- Complaints per 100,000 journeys – Table 4110 (not updated since 2019-20 Q4 due to impact of pandemic on journeys)
- Complaints per 100,000 journeys by operator – Table 4113 (not updated since 2019-20 Q4 due to impact of pandemic on journeys)

Complaint categories

- Complaints categories – Table 4130
- Complaints categories by operator – Table 4133

Complaint response rate

- Complaints responded to within 10 and 20 working days by operator – Table 4153

Complaints by contact method

- Complaints by contact method and train operator – Table 4143 (updated annually)

National Rail Enquiries

- National Rail Enquiry telephone service – Table 4180 (updated annually)

Praise

- Praise per 100,000 journeys by operator – Table 4123 (updated annually) (not updated since 2019-20 Q4 due to impact of pandemic on journeys)

Appeals

- Appeals closed by Transport Focus and London TravelWatch by operator – Table 4163
- Appeals categories closed by Transport Focus and London TravelWatch – Table 4160

Other related data

Delay compensation claims

One of the complaint categories in this release relates to delay compensation schemes. Statistics published on [delay compensation claims](#) were collected from 2018-19 onwards, and have been published in a factsheet alongside this statistical release since 2018-19 Q2.

The statistics include the volume of delay compensation claims received, closed and approved, as well as the percentage of claims which were responded to within 20 working days. All these measures are provided at national (Great Britain) level as well as by each individual train operator.

Passenger satisfaction with complaints handling

ORR also publish statistics about [passenger satisfaction with complaints handling](#).

Rail Ombudsman

The [Rail Ombudsman](#) provide a service to help sort out unresolved customer complaints about service providers within the rail industry.

Transport Focus - National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS)

The [NRPS](#) provides a network-wide picture of passengers' satisfaction with rail travel. Before the Coronavirus pandemic, passenger opinions of train services were collected twice a year from a representative sample of journeys. The [latest wave of the survey](#) was published on 2 July 2020. Due to the pandemic and a significant drop in the numbers of people using public transport, NRPS has been paused.

Annex 4 – ORR’s statistical publications

Statistical Releases

This publication is part of ORR’s [National Statistics](#) accredited releases, which consist of seven annual publications: **Estimates of Station Usage; Rail Industry Finance (UK); Rail Fares Index; Rail Safety Statistics; Rail Infrastructure and Assets; Rail Emissions; Regional Rail Usage**; and four quarterly publications: **Passenger Rail Performance; Freight Rail Usage and Performance; Passenger Rail Usage; Passenger Rail Service Complaints**.

In addition, ORR also publishes a number of Official Statistics, which consist of three annual publications: **Train Operating Company Key Statistics; Rail Statistics Compendium; Occupational Health**; and four quarterly publications: **Signals passed at danger (SPADS); Delay Compensation Claims; Disabled Persons Railcards (DPRC); Passenger assistance**.

All the above publications are available on the [data portal](#) along with a list of [publication dates](#) for the next 12 months.

National Statistics

The United Kingdom Statistics Authority designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. National Statistics status means that official statistics meet the highest standards of **trustworthiness, quality** and public **value**.

The majority of these [statistical releases were assessed in 2012](#) and hold National Statistics status. Since our assessment we have improved the content, presentation and quality of our statistical releases. In addition, in July 2019 we launched our new data portal. Therefore, in late 2019 we worked with the OSR to conduct a compliance check to ensure we are still meeting the standards of the Code. On 4 November 2019, [OSR published a letter](#) confirming that ORR’s statistics should continue to be designated as National Statistics. OSR found many positive aspects in the way that we produce and present our statistics and welcomed the range of improvements made since the statistics were last assessed. Estimates of Station Usage statistics were assessed in 2020.

For more information on how we adhere to the Code please see our [compliance statements](#). For more details or to provide feedback, please contact the Statistics Head of Profession (Lyndsey Melbourne) at rail.stats@orr.gov.uk.



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